

THINGS TO CONSIDER When Connecting With Fathers via MOBILE APPLICATIONS¹



¹ This document draws on material presented in Balu et al (2021) and other resources listed at the end of the document.

More fatherhood programs than ever before are using technology to connect participants to services – through live video conferences, on-demand recorded videos, text messages, mobile applications, private group messaging platforms, social media, electronic forms, and other media. While most programs experience problems early on when adjusting to new tools and platforms, recent reports indicate that there are certain advantages to “going virtual.” Potential benefits include more scheduling flexibility and increased accessibility for participants.

This document features tips for fatherhood programs that offer or are thinking about offering smartphone applications (“apps”) to participants as a supplement to other program services. A small but growing number of fatherhood-specific apps allow programs to promote attendance, reinforce curricular information, or provide additional parenting resources.

Tips for Connecting with Participants Using Apps



Train and Support Staff Members

- Make sure that staff members understand what the chosen app can and cannot do, so they can explain the app’s capabilities and limitations for participants.
- Document the process as fathers begin to download and activate the app. Evaluate their experiences and change your approach as needed.
- Ensure that staff members are committed to using the app. Use staff meetings to discuss the potential benefits of app usage and consider alternate approaches.
- Centralize documentation so one person has a bird’s-eye view of app deployment and use for all participants.



Identify Participant Concerns and Barriers

- Ask fathers whether they have questions about data security and privacy.
- Talk with them to clarify when and how often they have access to working devices and Wi-Fi.
- Identify potential barriers to use, such as financial constraints, shared phones, insufficient device memory, or limited data plans.
- Offer support and assistance to fathers who may have trouble downloading and using the application.



Address Identified Barriers

- Respond to fathers’ questions about data security and privacy (e.g., provide information on program security protocols, set up passwords for all online meetings, change meeting IDs frequently, avoid posting meeting logistics on social media).
- If possible, help fathers repair broken devices or obtain access to working devices (e.g., if a father shares a device with another family member, help him establish a plan for sharing time so he can participate in program activities).
- Find solutions if fathers have limited Wi-Fi access for initial download and installation (e.g., provide internet hotspots or access to the program’s Wi-Fi network).
- Build in dedicated staff time to assist with setup and activation, as well as any other issues or questions.

Alongside app-based interventions, text-messaging programs such as Text4Dad offer a different and complementary set of advantages, including faster engagement and wider outreach. Find out more about implementing text-based interventions [here](#).

NRFC RESOURCES

- [Using virtual technology in fatherhood programs](#) (Webinar, April 2020)
- [Using virtual technology: A practitioner conversation](#) (Webinar, July 2020)
- [Spotlight on using virtual technology in fatherhood programs](#) (2020)
- [Tipsheet on internet security](#) (2020)

RELATED RESEARCH AND RESOURCES ON MOBILE TECHNOLOGY AND FATHERHOOD SERVICES

- **Balu, R., Mancini, P., & Behrmann, R. (2021).** [Can a smartphone promote fathers' program attendance? Findings from the Building Bridges and Bonds evaluation of the DadTime intervention.](#) OPRE Report 2021-133. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Balu, R., Lee, S., & Steimle, S. (2018).** [Encouraging attendance and engagement in parenting programs: Developing a smartphone application with fathers, for fathers.](#) OPRE Report No. 2018-68. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Lee, S. J., Walsh, T. B., @ Lee, J. Y. (2019).** [mDad: Helping dads be better parents with mobile phones.](#) Pages 54-71 in Goldkind, L., Wolf, L., & Freddolino, P.P. (eds.), *Digital social work: Tools for practice with individuals, organizations, and communities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- **Fletcher, R., Hammond, C., Faulkner, D., Turner, N., Shipley, L., Read, D., & Gwynn, J. (2017).** [Stayin' on track: The feasibility of developing internet and mobile phone-based resources to support young Aboriginal fathers.](#) *Australian Journal of Primary Health* 23 (4), 329-334.
- **Virani, A., Duffett-Leger, L., & Letourneau, N. (2019).** [Parenting apps review: In search of good quality apps.](#) *Mhealth* 5 (44).